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article

The limits of localism: a decade of disaster on homelessness in England

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The rhetoric and practice of localism has attracted significant support within both political and academic circles in the UK in recent years. However, it is the contention of this article that there are, or should be, limits to localism as applied to the basic citizenship rights of vulnerable people. Drawing on a ten-year, mixed-methods study, we use the example of sharply rising homelessness in England to illustrate our argument that localist policymaking has an intrinsic tendency to disadvantage socially marginalised groups. While we acknowledge the central role played by austerity in driving up homelessness over the past decade, we advance the case that the post-2010 localist agenda of successive UK governments has also had an independent and malign effect. At the very least, we seek to demonstrate that localism cannot be viewed as a taken-for-granted progressive model, with centralism (that is, the consistent implementation of a policy across a whole country) also perfectly defensible on progressive grounds in relevant circumstances.

Key words homelessness • localism • housing • welfare reform • austerity • devolution • central–local relations • centralisation

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Introduction

The rhetoric and practice of ‘localism’ has attracted significant support from both the political Left and Right in the UK in recent years, with policymaking power considered excessively centralised in England, in particular, as compared with other

Western European countries (Hildreth, 2011). At its simplest, localism has been described as a ‘positive disposition to the decentralization of political power’ (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013: 10), with such decentralisation thought to offer a wide range of public policy benefits, including ‘diversity and experimentation ... learning and competition ... bring[ing] policymakers closer to people so they are more informed and accountable ... get[ting] central government out of the details of local policy ... engag[ing] people in decisions affecting their lives’ (Costa-Font and Greer, 2013: 2). While some analysts have defended centralism (Walker, 2002), the balance of UK academic opinion has tended to be broadly pro-localist (Powell and Boyne, 2001; Davies, 2008). Concerns have thus focused mainly on the ‘genuineness’ of localist initiatives, or their co-option by neoliberal agendas (Deas, 2013), rather than in-principle objections to the devolution of power down to lower tiers of government or local non-state actors (Hildreth, 2011).

However, it is the contention of this article that there are, or should be, limits to localism as applied to the basic citizenship rights of marginalised groups. In the inevitable trade-off between local autonomy and horizontal equity (that is, treating individuals with similar levels of need living in different places in the same way), some authors seem sympathetic to the argument that ‘some degree of inequality may be a price worth paying for local democracy’ (Powell and Boyne, 2001: 186). However, we argue that the avoidance of harm and the demands of justice should take precedence over local political responsiveness when it comes to meeting the fundamental human needs of vulnerable people (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Moreover, we would further venture that there is something *intrinsic* about localism – that is, to policy and priority setting at smaller territorial areas – that will *tend* to be antithetical to the interests of the most socially marginalised groups. Of course, we accept that local and regional authorities may sometimes pursue a generally more progressive policy line than central government. One only has to review the history of UK ‘municipal socialism’ (Davies, 2008), or welfare expansion by Spanish regional governments (Costa-Font and Greer, 2013), to observe such instances. However, a generally egalitarian political outlook should not be confused with a progressive stance towards socially marginalised groups, such as homeless people, ex-offenders, those with substance misuse problems and others apt to be viewed as ‘undeserving’ by local communities. Indeed, international comparative evidence has found that barriers to assistance for such groups can be heightened in egalitarian political communities where a particular premium may be placed on social cohesion, behavioural conformity and personal responsibility (Fitzpatrick and Stephens, 2014).

In this article, we use the example of sharply rising homelessness in England over the past decade to illustrate and explicate our contention that localism has a necessary tendency to disadvantage socially marginalised groups. It should be noted that that we use the term ‘necessary tendency’ here in the critical realist sense of signalling an underlying causal mechanism that may or may not be activated, depending on contingent political and other conditions (Sayer, 2000), but is nonetheless ‘real’ and should be recognised in developing policy and political strategies to protect vulnerable groups.

At the very least, we seek to demonstrate that localism cannot be viewed as a taken-for-granted progressive model, and must be critically assessed for its actual (as opposed to hypothesised or hoped for) outcomes, with centralism also perfectly defensible on progressive grounds in relevant circumstances. By focusing on homeless people

as an extreme case of a marginalised group, we hope to bring into sharp relief the naivety, or cynicism, that lies at the heart of the localist policy agenda, as articulated by [Jacobs and Manzi \(2013: 40–1\)](#):

[Localism] is premised on depoliticized notions of community, neighbourhood and engagement that overlook the degree to which these neighbourhoods are sites of conflicts.... Consensus is rarely achieved, particularly [on] decisions ... about the availability of scarce resources.... Crucially this requires government safeguards that protect against abuse and protection for vulnerable groups to ensure social justice and democratic citizenship.

The article proceeds as follows. After detailing our research methods, we summarise recent homelessness trends and post-2010 central government policy responses. Next, we explore the concept and practical implementation of localism in England, before exploring its homelessness implications and consequences. The key counterargument is then considered: that austerity, not localism, has driven rising homelessness. We conclude by seeking to defend a centralised response to homelessness, or at least a response that is steered from central government in certain key respects.

Methods

The article draws on an ongoing ten-year, multi-method study of the homelessness impacts of economic and policy change in England (2011–21).¹ Since 2011, we have annually reviewed policy, legal and research developments on homelessness, housing and social security. We have also undertaken face-to-face and telephone interviews with senior stakeholders from the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors (averaging 15 interviews annually). These key informants are selected to have complimentary specialist knowledge in the fields of youth, single, family and statutory homelessness, as well as offering a balance in terms of sectoral perspective and geographical location. All interviews are audio-recorded, with informed consent, and fully transcribed before being thematically analysed. While we interview largely the same core group of key informants each year in order to track their (well-informed) views of policy and economic impacts as they unfold over time, we also select a specific theme each year to subject to a particularly ‘deep dive’. Particularly pertinent to the present article is that in 2016/17 ([Fitzpatrick et al, 2017](#)), localism was selected as that year’s theme, with both the selection of key informants and interview topic guide tailored accordingly.

Another core element of the study is an analysis of official rough-sleeping estimates, together with statistics on ‘statutory’ homelessness (see later), as well as a range of household surveys containing data relevant to homelessness. To tap into front-line practitioner perspectives, we also undertake an annual online survey of England’s 326 local authorities, targeting homelessness service managers, and achieving response rates of 43–57 per cent. This level of participation has tended to increase over time and represents a creditable level of engagement for an entirely voluntary survey. In each of the five years in which the survey has run, respondents have included a wide spread of local authorities in terms of regional location, size, political complexion and homelessness rates. Moreover, since there is a significant turnover each year in which specific councils respond to the survey, we have captured the perspective of a very large proportion of all English local authorities over the course of the study. This has enabled

us to delve beneath the official statistics to enhance understanding of how housing market change, welfare reforms and other key policy developments have impacted on homelessness trends and responses at the local level. The survey comprises both closed and open-ended questions, generating rich qualitative as well as quantitative data.

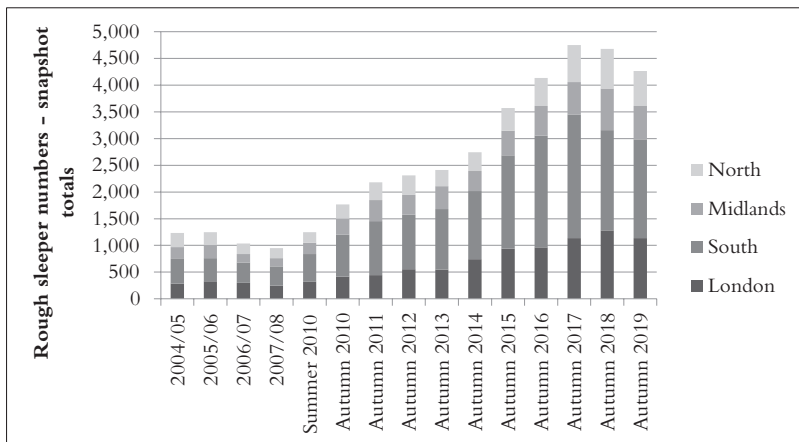
This article thus benefits from a methodology that has been devised to offer a comprehensive and longitudinal view of homelessness developments, enabling their situation in a wider policy and structural context. The research gained ethical approval from Heriot-Watt University Ethics Committee before the commencement of fieldwork in 2011, and this has been kept under review ever since, with specific attention given to the ongoing ethical challenges inherent in maintaining the anonymity of a relatively small number of high-profile senior stakeholders who would be potentially recognisable within the field were it not for the efforts that we make to disguise their identity in all published outputs.

Consistent with UK traditions (Fitzpatrick et al, 2009), the research adopts a broad definition of homelessness. Thus, we cover not only people sleeping rough, but also residents of hostels, refuges, bed-and-breakfast (B&B) hotels and other temporary accommodation, as well as households that English local authorities are legally obliged to rehouse as 'statutorily homeless', that is, assessed as homeless and in 'priority need' (mainly families with children and vulnerable adults). This statutory homelessness system has been a core part of the national English (indeed, wider British) welfare state since 1977, and we return to discuss it further later (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2016).

The problem: rising homelessness

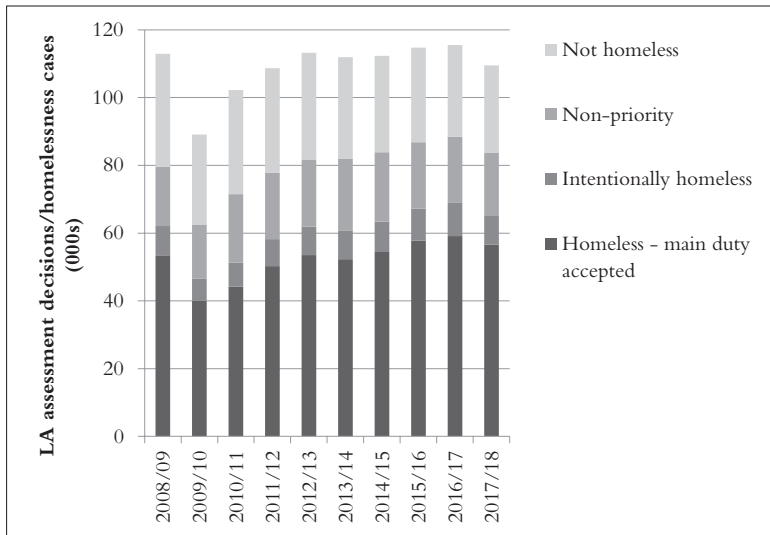
Elected in 2010 on a platform of public spending austerity, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat UK Coalition government immediately embarked on a radical welfare and housing reform programme, with a particular focus on cuts to housing allowances for private tenants (Fitzpatrick et al, 2011). All enumerated forms of homelessness subsequently escalated in England, including rough sleeping, which has more than doubled since 2010 according to official numbers (see Figure 1). While these

Figure 1: Trends in local authority rough-sleeper estimates by broad region, 2004–19



Source: 2004/05–2007/08 – collated from Audit Commission Best Value Performance Indicators returns; Summer 2010 onwards – MHCLG.

Figure 2: Statutory homelessness assessment decisions, 2008/09–17/18



Source: Fitzpatrick et al (2019). Source material from MHCLG published statistics.

rough-sleeping statistics have some well-documented methodological weaknesses (UK Statistics Authority, 2015), the direction of travel has been clear, albeit that this trend began to reverse from 2018.

At the same time, there has also been an upward trajectory in statutory homelessness numbers in England since 2010 (see Figure 2), concentrated in London and the South (see Figure 3), almost all of which can be attributed to an extraordinary increase in private tenancy terminations (see Figure 4). Even as the rising tide of statutory homelessness acceptances may have recently lost some momentum, temporary accommodation placements have continued to grow (see Figure 5) as local authorities have faced an intensifying shortage of suitable and affordable rehousing opportunities for families entitled to rehousing (Stephens et al, 2019).

Growing homelessness in England is, we would argue, the result of deliberate policy choices rather than the post-2008 recession: previous recessions have not necessarily witnessed a rise in homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al, 2011). What has been particularly ‘toxic’ in recent years has been the combination of an increasingly pressurised housing market in London and the South of England, and the intensification of welfare benefit restrictions. In our annual survey of English local authorities in 2015, 93 per cent of London boroughs, as compared with 49 per cent of Northern local authorities, reported that post-2010 benefit cuts had increased homelessness in their area (Fitzpatrick et al, 2016). This analysis is consistent with quantitative modelling evidence that:

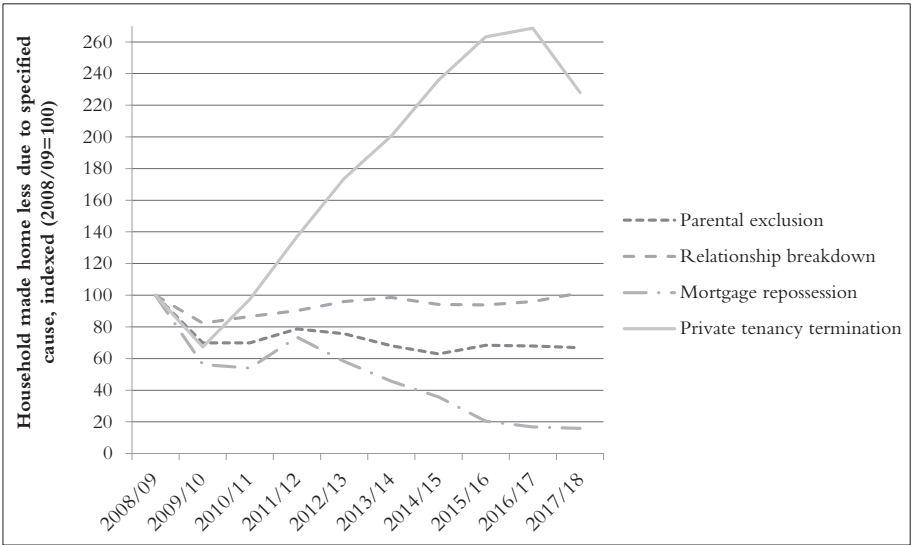
The most important driver of homelessness in all its forms is poverty.... Other drivers include availability and affordability of accommodation, the extent to which prevention measures are used, and the demographics of people experiencing homelessness.... [C]essation of welfare cuts and focused prevention activity can make an impact on ... homelessness but this is limited if not accompanied by investment in affordable and accessible housing supply. (Bramley, 2017: 1)

Figure 3: Homelessness acceptances, 2008/09–17/18: trends at broad region level – indexed



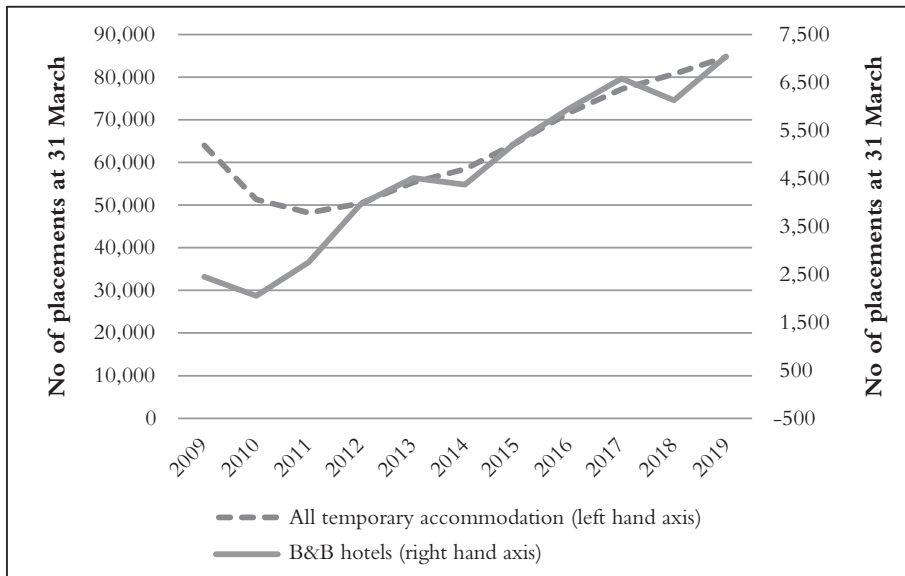
Source: Fitzpatrick et al (2019). Source material from MHCLG published statistics.

Figure 4: Change in number of households made homeless due to selected immediate causes, 2008/09–17/18 – indexed



Source: Fitzpatrick et al (2019). Source material from MHCLG published statistics.

Figure 5: Local authorities' use of temporary accommodation for homeless households



Source: Fitzpatrick et al (2019). Source material from MHCLG published statistics.

Highly relevant here, then is a continuing decline in the availability of social housing, with the net annual flow of vacancies having halved over the past 20 years (Stephens et al, 2019). Bramley's (2017) conclusions are also consistent with a National Audit Office (2017: 7) assessment that 'Changes to Local Housing Allowance are likely to have contributed to the affordability of tenancies for those on benefits, and are an element of the increase in homelessness.' Moreover, the head of the National Audit Office commented that:

'Homelessness in all its forms has significantly increased in recent years.... Despite this, government has not evaluated the impact of its reforms on this issue, and there remain gaps in its approach. It is difficult to understand why the Department persisted with its light touch approach in the face of such a visibly growing problem.'

Subsequently, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts described homelessness in England as a 'national crisis' and chided the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for its 'unacceptably complacent' stance on the problem (House of Commons, 2017).

It is this article's contention that this apparent 'complacency' arises directly from the political commitment of post-2010 UK governments to localism. Moreover, we argue that alongside the austerity-driven social security cuts and housing market pressures just discussed, the policy and ideology of localism has played an independent and malign role in shaping England's recent homelessness trajectory. Next, we reflect on the theory and practice of localism in this context, before moving on to consider its associated homelessness impacts.

Localism: the solution?

For too long, central government has hoarded and concentrated power. Trying to improve people's lives by imposing decisions, setting targets and demanding inspections from Whitehall simply doesn't work.... It leaves no room for adaptation to reflect local circumstances or innovation to deliver services more effectively and at lower cost. And it leaves people feeling 'done to' and imposed upon – the very opposite of the sense of participation and involvement on which a healthy democracy thrives.... This is the essence of the Big Society.... We are breaking down the barriers that stop councils, local charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups getting things done for themselves. ([Department for Communities and Local Government \(2011\)](#))

The localism agenda of the 2010 Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government was anchored in a decentralisation ideology shared by both parties ([Deas, 2013](#)). With deep roots in communitarian social and political thought ([Etzioni, 1998](#)), which had inspired a limited 'new localist' policy direction at the end of the Labour government under Gordon Brown ([Turner, 2019](#)), David Cameron's 'Big Society' programme was portrayed as a decisive rejection of old-fashioned, statist styles of governance ([Jacobs and Manzi, 2013](#)) in favour of Burkean 'little platoons' undertaking collective forms of (voluntary) social action ([Clarke and Cochrane, 2013](#)). While there were continuities with New Labour's 'conditional localism' ([Hildreth, 2011](#)), a key distinction was the Coalition government's enthusiasm for 'actively dismantling (rather than reforming) parts of the state' ([Deas, 2013: 73](#)).

Thus, key to these linked Conservative and Liberal agendas was the retreat of central government, giving other stakeholders – local authorities but also voluntary and community groups, and faith-based organisations – space to play a bigger role in public welfare ([Deas, 2013](#)). The highest-profile example has been food banks, the use of which has grown exponentially in recent years ([Sosenko et al, 2019](#)), with David Cameron describing food-bank volunteers as 'part of what I call the Big Society' ([Mulholland, 2012](#)). Here, Conservative agendas focused on bolstering personal and civic responsibility ([McKee, 2015](#)), dovetailed neatly with traditional Liberal Democrat concerns with 'community politics' ([Hildreth, 2011](#)) and devolved forms of governance ([Dorey and Garnett, 2016](#)). As one vocal supporter of localism commented:

'Eric Pickles [the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government under the Coalition government] ... announced his arrival in the Department by claiming he had three priorities for his tenure: localism, localism and localism. Liberal Democrat ministers quipped that they would add a fourth priority: localism.' ([Cox, 2010: 1](#))

Taking as axiomatic that "England [is] one of the most centralized Western democracies" ([Manzi, 2015](#)), a 2011 parliamentary report opined that: 'The principle of localism is not controversial; it commands cross-party support.... The Government's approach in practice, however, has thus far been marked by inconsistency and incoherence, not helped by a definition of localism that is extremely elastic' ([House of Commons, 2011: 3](#)).

Tellingly, though, even at this early stage, warnings on this agenda were sounded by advocacy organisations, as the parliamentary committee conceded:

There is not universal support for the idea that central government should retreat entirely from local affairs, allowing accountability to local people to replace performance monitoring from the centre. In particular, organisations representing vulnerable, marginalised or minority groups argue that these sections of the community need protection that cannot be provided by the current mechanisms of local democratic accountability.... National minimum service standards, in some form, may be necessary. ([House of Commons, 2011: 4](#))

The Localism Act 2011 gave legal form to the Coalition's core localist ethos – that central government should largely absent itself from direct involvement in issues such as homelessness – and, at the same time, incorporated substantive elements highly relevant to homelessness service delivery. This included new powers for social landlords to grant fixed-term tenancies, rather than traditional open-ended tenancies, and enabled local authorities to restrict access to their housing waiting lists through locally defined eligibility rules, for example, excluding aspiring applicants on the grounds of age, residency, work-search activity or a 'poor tenancy record'. Crucially, councils could also now elect to discharge their statutory rehousing duty to homeless households via the offer of a fixed-term private, rather than social, tenancy. Another key homelessness-relevant measure incorporated within this localism agenda – albeit introduced in the final phase of the predecessor Labour government – was the 2009 removal of the ring fence for 'Supporting People' funding. This underpins local authority provision of housing-related support that helps homeless people and other vulnerable groups sustain their accommodation. Since then, authorities have been free to divert this money to other priorities ([Turner, 2019](#)). The Housing and Planning Act 2016, subsequently passed under the Cameron-led Conservative government, sought to impose on local authorities fixed-term tenancies and other measures originally promoted as local 'flexibilities'; however, the May-led Conservative administration backed off from this coercive stance in the radically changed political climate after the Grenfell Tower fire disaster ([Stephens et al, 2019](#)).

Over the past decade, the localisation of key policy and practice frameworks has been evident not only in the housing and homelessness arena, but also in welfare benefits, particularly at the emergency end of the spectrum ([Social Security Advisory Committee, 2015](#)). Three crucial measures stand out here. The first has been the greatly expanded budget for Discretionary Housing Payments, affording local authorities substantial funds for autonomously determined welfare expenditure to (very partially) mitigate mainstream housing allowance cuts. Discretionary housing payment allocations to councils were ramped up from £30 million in 2011/12 to £165 million in 2014/15, which is a measure interpreted by [Turner \(2019: 60\)](#); see also [Meers, 2019](#)) as enabling ministers to 'shift some responsibility for the effects of its decisions to local authorities'.

Second, the discretionary Social Fund – cash payments to very low-income households in crisis situations – was abolished in 2013 and replaced by a power (but not a duty) for local authorities to establish their own local welfare assistance schemes. Initially, funding for these local schemes was identified, though not ring-fenced,

within the central government revenue support grant to local authorities. In 2017/18, this budget line disappeared altogether in the local government funding settlement (Gibbons, 2017).

Third, also in 2013, the national Council Tax Benefit scheme was replaced by locally determined ‘council tax reduction schemes’, along with a 10 per cent overall budget cut. Associated protections stipulated for pensioner households meant that this effectively amounted to a 20 per cent cut in funds available for ‘unprotected’ working-age claimants.

It is important to acknowledge that key elements of the national welfare framework remained in place even after these changes were implemented, including a (weakened) national system of income maintenance benefits and an (altered) statutory homelessness system. Some counter-localisation trends were also evident, most notably, local authorities lost their role in the administration of housing allowances with the roll-out of the new, simplified, working-age benefit ‘Universal Credit’. However, the combined impact of the housing and welfare changes outlined earlier was, we would argue, to significantly elevate the role played by English councils and other local actors in determining the scale, nature and generosity of the emergency help available to impoverished and vulnerable groups. We now turn to look at the interrelationship between this encroaching localism and increasing homelessness across England.

The homelessness impacts of localism

National-level key informants interviewed in our study over the past decade have been consistently critical of localism’s impacts on homelessness. Their core concern has been the central government’s post-2010 vacation of this policy space, which some have characterised as a ‘dereliction of duty’ (MacLennan and O’Sullivan, 2013):

‘Eric Pickles ... was very clear that everything was about localism and it wasn’t the role of government to support, interfere or have anything to do with how local authorities delivered on the ground.... That mantra of localism ... has its place ... but the way it was taken and interpreted by [the government] has been a disaster for homelessness. It means that the structural changes that needed to be put in place to manage and go forward ... didn’t happen.’ (Independent key informant, 2017)

While acknowledging that a range of targeted homelessness initiatives have been supported by successive austerity-era Westminster governments, informants generally perceived an absence of strategic direction or leverage over homelessness practice. As also noted by the National Audit Office (2017), this contrasts with earlier phases of rising homelessness – for example, the late 1980s and late 1990s – when Westminster took a highly assertive and often successful (if sometimes controversial) stance on homelessness:

‘I use the example of under the Blair government and the Social Exclusion Unit appointing Louise Casey as the [homelessness] “tsar”. Whether you agree with it or not ... it gets [things] done ... and we cut rough sleeping by two thirds because somebody [was] allowed – given permission and given authority and power – to do it.’ (Statutory sector key informant, 2017)

‘when we’ve tackled homelessness in the past, we’ve done it in collaboration between central, local and voluntary sector providers, and we’ve done it with a strong sense of target and a strong sense of direction. The government, over the last few years, have not had a sense of direction, and a lot of the money that they’ve thrown towards it has been singular funded streams but with no sense of coherence across the top of them.... What we know from our work around the country is that local areas do look to government for leadership on this stuff.’ (Voluntary sector key informant, 2017)

Echoing the parliamentary evidence referenced earlier, we encountered a particularly intense critique of post-2010 localism from single homelessness service providers, who, from the very start, feared that the withdrawal of central government from this policy arena would seriously disadvantage their clients:

‘You need a national framework and to work flexibly within it locally. If councils are not told by government what to do ... the Not in My Back Garden idea ... I worry about giving everything to local councillors.’ (voluntary sector key informant, 2012)

Alongside this overarching concern about the lack of centralised policy direction on homelessness, specific measures implemented under the localist rubric also raised concerns among voluntary sector key informants and sometimes also local authority homelessness officers.

Foremost among these were the new powers that local authorities gained under the Localism Act 2011 to restrict eligibility to the social housing waiting list. While statutorily homeless households should, by law, have subsequently continued to receive reasonable preference in council housing allocations, there is evidence from case law that some councils started to use their new powers to unlawfully exclude them from their housing lists.² Key informant testimony indicated that such restrictions were sometimes even applied to women and children fleeing domestic violence:

‘in some areas, you have to have lived there for five years before you are eligible for a local authority property.... We’ve tried to argue ... that women experiencing domestic violence shouldn’t have had to live in that borough for that amount of time.’ (voluntary sector key informant, 2014)

Some local authority survey respondents confirmed the existence of these unlawful practices:

‘We have a five-year residency rule which means 50 per cent of homeless families cannot apply for social housing.’ (local authority respondent, the South, 2016)

Voluntary sector concern that local authorities’ ability to meet their legal duties by rehousing people in the private rather than social rented sector would deter applications for assistance seemed confirmed by some of what local authorities had to say (see also [Turner, 2019](#)):

‘What ... had a big impact on our statutory homeless numbers is that we adopted the Localism Act power to discharge duty with a single private rented offer. And just the threat of that in our Housing Options discussions with customers at an initial stage has been sufficient to divert even more families away from the statutory route.’ (Local authority respondent, London, 2014)

A few local authorities saw the fixed-term social tenancies enabled under the 2011 Act as having positive homelessness impacts: “The introduction of fixed-term tenancies may result in more properties being available to homeless households if fixed-term tenancies are not extended” (local authority respondent, the South, 2016). However, the balance of local authority opinion was that their effects would be negative: “It is unclear what will happen to tenants on time-limited tenancies.... Some may face repeat homelessness at the end of the period” (local authority respondent, the South, 2016); “The ending of secure social tenancies is likely to see an increase in homelessness in the future” (local authority respondent, the North, 2016). Some local authorities emphasised what was seen as the beneficially increased scope for the local coordination of welfare funds:

‘Having locally determined forms of welfare such as Discretionary Housing Payments, local welfare assistance funds, has helped us to target these funds to preventing and relieving homelessness. Bringing together this type of support, budgeting, employment and homelessness support, has enabled us to stabilise households’ position more effectively.’ (Local authority respondent, London, 2016)

However, the growing reliance on these discretionary, budget-limited schemes was more often viewed negatively by local authority homelessness managers, as well as by national key informants: “More groups of people now reliant on Discretionary Housing Payments due to [welfare] cuts. There is no funding for local welfare assistance funds. Council Tax Support scheme changed eligibility which reduced ... access” (local authority respondent, the South, 2016). It should be noted here that without a statutory duty to provide a local welfare assistance fund, many cash-strapped English local authorities have now closed or severely reduced their emergency welfare schemes (Gibbons, 2017). As revealed by our 2018 survey, in almost one fifth (18 per cent) of all English councils, these funds had entirely disappeared: “[Name of county council] decided to abandon this scheme. Seven local authorities are affected by this decision. There has been no replacement” (local authority respondent, the South, 2018). The direction of travel has been similar, if not quite as catastrophic, with Council Tax Benefit schemes (Turner, 2019).

However, most serious of all for homeless people has probably been the loss of the ring-fenced Supporting People funds:

‘I think there are some positive aspects to localism affording communities greater involvement in decision-making but equally there are negatives, such as allowing councils to make decisions locally, especially where ring-fenced money has been concerned as this is no longer spent as intended in our area, such as the Supporting People grant.’ (Local authority respondent, the Midlands, 2016)

Such concerns were rejected by the then Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, in evidence to the 2011 Select Committee inquiry:

I am aware of some places in the country that are taking significant cuts in Supporting People – I completely deprecate that. But most local authorities are protecting the scheme, not just to help vulnerable people but because it also makes enormous economic sense. One of the consequences of localism is that you have to allow local communities to make decisions about where that spending goes. Most sensible local authorities will come to the conclusion that £1 spent on Supporting People will probably save them £5 or £6 further down the line.... It would be a brave local authority that cut Supporting People. (House of Commons, 2011: 27)

In reality, between 2010/11 and 2018/19, English local authorities reduced Supporting People expenditure by 78 per cent in real terms.³ The minister's 2011 comments are thus revealed as naive at best. The devastating impact of the loss of Supporting People funding for, in particular, single homelessness services has been widely reported on, not least in successive annual reports by the umbrella organisation [Homeless Link \(2015b\)](#) and a highly critical report by the [National Audit Office \(2017\)](#).

Is the problem localism or austerity?

Many policy analysts might argue at this point that, surely, the homelessness-related concerns articulated earlier, especially the cuts in various forms of funding, should be attributed to overall public spending contraction, not to localism specifically. Councils have certainly borne the brunt of austerity-related funding cuts, with the most deprived local authorities tending to be the hardest hit ([Hastings et al, 2017](#)). An estimated £5 billion less was spent by local authorities on homelessness-related activities between 2008/09 and 2017/18 than would have been the case had funding continued at 2008/09 levels ([Thunder and Rose, 2019](#)), and this at a time when homelessness numbers rose sharply.

We would therefore readily acknowledge the devastating impacts of austerity on the support available to people at risk of homelessness since 2010. It is also clear that localism is sometimes used as a tool to help deliver on austerity, with the 'cutting and devolving' of budgets formerly the responsibility of central government, sometimes as an antecedent to eliminating them altogether, being a well-evidenced political stratagem to mute opposition and/or deflect blame ([Costa-Font and Greer, 2013](#); [Meers, 2019](#); [Turner, 2019](#)). A clear post-2010 example of such 'policy dumping' ([MacLennan and O'Sullivan, 2013](#)) has been the lamentable fate of the discretionary Social Fund in England, as noted earlier.

We nevertheless contend that there are effects that are *intrinsic* to the logic of localism that will tend to have deleterious impacts on homeless people and other marginalised groups even outside of a period of austerity, albeit that these effects are often amplified by simultaneous public expenditure cuts. First, localism inappropriately and unfairly places primary responsibility for tackling structurally driven social problems on local actors who have no direct leverage over the relevant welfare policies and public expenditure decisions. This is one example of what [Clarke and Cochrane \(2013: 14\)](#) term the 'non-autonomous' nature of local needs, which very

often result from ‘decisions made far beyond local borders’. Of course, this observation is consistent with the idea that some local authorities may be more able or motivated than others to mitigate the impacts of these damaging national decisions (Watts et al, 2019). Moreover, while the prevalence of a localist agenda does not *prevent* central government from addressing the structural causes of homelessness, it may well help facilitate the avoidance of doing so by providing convenient ‘cover’ for either deleterious actions (such as ‘stealthy’ welfare cuts) or simply inaction: “Localism was merely the government’s way of absolving itself of any responsibility for housing and homelessness” (local authority respondent, the South, 2016).

Second, by definition, the localisation of the homelessness policymaking function brings about a diffusion of expertise across a very large number of, often very small, local authorities, who may lack any specialist capacity in this field. This extreme fragmentation of policymaking functions also poses significant challenges for those seeking to influence policy and practice in progressive directions for marginalised groups. While innovations may often emerge in a bottom-up fashion – as with ‘Housing Options’ approaches to homelessness prevention, for example (Pawson, 2007) – the scaling up of such approaches ultimately relies on central government stewardship. It is no coincidence that major steps forward on homelessness have almost always required the deployment of the legal, financial and regulatory levers that the government uniquely has at its disposal. Key examples from England include the two thirds reduction in rough sleeping between 1999 and 2002, and the 50 per cent reduction in temporary accommodation placements between 2003 and 2010 (Fitzpatrick et al, 2011). So too in other countries: the much-lauded ‘Housing First’-based Finnish drive to end homelessness (Pleace et al, 2015) and the abolition of the priority need criterion in Scotland, such that virtually all homeless people are now entitled to settled rehousing, both emerged from national programmes driven by state-led ‘progressive elites’ (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2016). In contrast, relying on hundreds of local authorities to identify and adopt well-evidenced new ideas means that advances will almost certainly be patchy and slow – with a significant and inefficient ‘drag’ on progress exerted by laggards. Of course, in the English case, this is to some extent deliberate, with localism motivated, in part, by ‘a rejection of the rational, evidence-based approach ... central to the politics of the previous Labour administration’ (Deas, 2013: 67).

Third, increasingly localised housing and welfare responses, especially – but not only – in times of budget stringency, will often make it more difficult for those without a ‘local connection’ to access the help they need. The Social Security Advisory Committee (2015), for example, reported that councils in the post-2011 period were increasingly requiring commissioned service providers, including Women’s Aid, to ‘gatekeep’ on their behalf by obliging them to exclude those without a local connection. Turner (2019) reports that many local authorities utilised 2011 Act powers to exclude those lacking a local connection from their housing waiting lists, including, as we saw earlier, some statutorily homeless households. This was confirmed by local authorities in our annual survey: “More control over Housing Register has been good and enabled us to prioritise local people” (local authority, the South, 2016). Similarly, the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (House of Commons, 2016) has expressed concern about the application of ‘local connection’ requirements to access local welfare assistance schemes. The direction of travel is thus very clear and perfectly logical: the more localised the welfare and housing safety net

is, the more likely it is that vulnerable groups who are mobile between local authority areas (for example, women fleeing violence) will be excluded from assistance as local authorities face both fiscal and political incentives to restrict local services to 'local people' (Turner, 2019).

Fourth, 'unpopular' groups such as homeless people, especially those with complex support needs, are vulnerable to marginalisation in decentralised systems, which can leave politically invisible or geographically dispersed groups 'at the mercy of the vagaries of local politics and funding choices made under the pressure of cuts' (House of Commons, 2011: 28). Turner (2019: 14) has adroitly noted that 'in such circumstances (high potential savings, low political costs), localization is highly likely to lead to reductions in the entitlements of small and relatively vulnerable groups within local populations'. One supported housing provider made this plain to the parliamentary inquiry on localism in 2011:

Services like ours, which are mainly about providing support and accommodation for chronic alcoholics and drug addicts, are seen by many as helping people who do not deserve help.... [A]t election time, the candidate who announced that his policy was to close hostels for alcoholics and drug addicts, to get rid of inmates and cut the council tax, might stand a good chance of dislodging a responsible councillor from his seat in a marginal ward. (House of Commons, 2011: 28)

While such concerns are certainly heightened during periods of austerity and budget cuts, there is no reason to suppose that they are limited to these contexts. For one thing, they extend beyond matters of resource allocation and also pertain to local resistance to the presence of, and provision for, 'undeserving' groups (see also Matthews et al, 2015). As one single homelessness service senior manager commented to us: "as a pan-London organisation, we represent a community of identity, not a geographic community, and focus on geographic community will always disadvantage us". He went on to say that "communities are by definition exclusive" and will tend to exclude his clients who "don't fit and obviously don't fit". The umbrella organisation Homeless Link (2015a: 10) has likewise highlighted ways in which localism can unhelpfully open up single homelessness services to community scrutiny, as well as to budget cuts: 'We have learnt from the experience of increased localism that investment can be diverted away from population groups [lacking] statutory protection, and ... also among the least popular locally – such as single people who are homeless or sleeping rough.' The validity of these concerns has, of course, been substantiated in spectacular fashion by the massively disproportionate cuts made to Supporting People expenditure by English local authorities (see also Turner, 2019).

Fifth, and most fundamentally, the weakening of the national floor of entitlement-based protection in favour of locally determined, variable levels of assistance introduces, for us, a morally unsupportable level of horizontal inequity in the meeting of vulnerable citizens' fundamental needs (Doyal and Gough, 1991). As the Social Security Advisory Committee (2015: 47) commented:

shifting the balance away from national policies and national minimum standards brings with it a greater risk not just of unacceptable variation in practice but of inequality in standards and outcomes. While it can be argued

that varying inputs and delivery methods at the local level can reflect different local needs and circumstances, some of our stakeholders maintained that this should not undermine a fundamental commitment to the achievement of similar or equivalent outcomes based on common citizenship.

While it is, of course, vital that national programmes are tailored to (objectively varying) local conditions, it is simply not safe to assume that local ‘folk ... know what’s best’ (Eric Pickles, quoted in Clarke and Cochrane, 2013: 20) for homeless people with complex support needs, and this includes well-intentioned local voluntary and community organisations. Far from necessarily being a progressive force for good, some ‘path-dependent’ voluntary sector actors, many of them faith-based and providing rudimentary and even damaging types of support, can be significant *barriers* to progress in the homelessness field, whose opposition to radical reform has to be overcome with national, evidence-based initiatives (Parsell and Watts, 2017).

Last, but certainly not least, the indignity and disempowerment intrinsic to reliance on (local) discretionary rather than (national) entitlement-based assistance must be recognised (see also Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018):

‘The insidious nature of [Discretionary Housing Payments] has not been highlighted enough in moving away from a social security system that is governed by universal regulation and based on need. People should be able to rely on a basic level of support whatever the circumstances.... It is demeaning and stressful for recipients to go “cap in hand” to a local official.’ (Local authority respondent, the South, 2015)

Conclusions

This article started from the premise that rising homelessness post-2010 resulted largely from welfare reform and housing market pressures, which are themselves the outcome of deliberate (and avoidable) policy choices by central government. However, we would also insist that the ideology and practice of localism has made a bad situation worse – enabling central government to evade responsibility for the consequences of its actions, and leaving cash-strapped, ill-equipped local authorities, and increasingly civil society actors, to pick up the pieces of what has become a national homelessness crisis. The ‘patchy retrenchment’ (Turner, 2019: 61) that localism has wrought in housing and welfare responses across England has weakened the emergency support available to vulnerable households, consequently contributing to rising homelessness.

While we have focused here on a single case study drawn from a period of austerity, our contention is that the underlying logic of our argument extends its resonance much further. In particular, we would posit that the ‘conservative communitarianism’ (Davies, 2008) intrinsic to localism means that even in times of rising budgets, and in varying political contexts, this model has a necessary tendency (Sayer, 2000) to be highly problematic for relatively small, marginalised and unpopular populations whose interests are imperilled in the cut and thrust of local politics. Admittedly, New Labour’s ‘predilection for centralism’ may well have precipitated the beginning of a localist reaction before the Coalition took office (MacLennan and O’Sullivan, 2013: 608). Nevertheless, at least when it comes to homelessness, the outcomes of New Labour’s centralising tendencies were, on balance, strongly (albeit not uniformly)

positive (Fitzpatrick et al, 2009). This is also in keeping with experiences in other countries, where effective measures on homelessness almost always require a strong steer from central or large-scale federal government (Fitzpatrick et al, 2012). Thus, the alarming rise in homelessness in England, and the deleterious role played by localism therein, can and should be laid at the door of Liberal Democrat ‘community politics’ as much as Conservative anti-state, anti-redistributive and pro-charity ‘Big Society’ ideology.

Particularly in the current anti-elitist climate, it contradicts the populist zeitgeist to say so, but sometimes the ‘woman/man in Whitehall *does* know best’ – as they have the research evidence, policy knowledge, money, leverage, targets and performance framework needed to enable positive change. The extent to which local stakeholders *welcomed* rather than *resented* proactive central government support – and often direction – on homelessness is striking from the quantitative and qualitative data that we have collected over the past decade. *How* this is done is crucial: inflexible diktats from generalist civil servants with no specialist knowledge on homelessness are, of course, likely to be both unwelcome and ineffective. However, hands-on support from specialist homelessness advisors – for example, seconded experts well versed in the pressures that local authorities face, and with the ability to adapt their highly ‘granular’ advice to the complex realities on the ground – is quite a different matter.

Clearly, in this field as in many others, a balance must be struck between flexibility to accommodate varying local conditions, and national minimum standards. It would be disingenuous to maintain that there were no positive outcomes of localism over the past decade. Certainly, some imaginative councils, with progressive political backing, used these flexibilities to align (dwindling) resources as effectively as possible to local conditions (Watts et al, 2019). It may also be that city-regions offer a more suitable (larger) scale for local coordinated efforts to address homelessness (Costa-Font and Greer, 2013).

However, the overall message of this article is that strong central government leadership and accountability is needed to drive positive change on homelessness – or even just to stabilise a deteriorating situation. Successive Coalition and Conservative governments may have hoped that localising homelessness responses would make the crisis ‘less conspicuous’ (Jacobs and Manzi, 2013: 39) but the unmistakably growing numbers on the streets, reinforced by public and media concerns about the deaths of homeless people (Office for National Statistics, 2018), put paid to that. This prompted something of a retreat from localism under the later stages of the May government, which introduced a new national strategy on rough sleeping (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018), and also supported the passage of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which originated as a Private Member’s Bill. The positive impacts of these central government actions can at least arguably be seen in the recent plateauing of homelessness and rough sleeping captured in Figures 1–4 earlier; however, it will take some considerable time to dial back the damaging effects of almost a decade of localism compounding austerity. Interestingly, the current Conservative Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has recently appointed Tony Blair’s original ‘homelessness czar’ (Louise Casey) to conduct a review of rough sleeping in England in a move that seems to take us back full circle to the time before the disaster that has been localism in this field.⁴

Geographical variability driven by local political priorities and expediency may be acceptable, even desirable, in some areas of public policy to bolster local democracy (Davies, 2008) and to align local policies with citizens’ preferences (Turner, 2019).

However, we would contend that localism was always an obviously dangerous strategy on issues like homelessness and crisis welfare provision, which concern the fundamental needs of a marginalised population. As a concept, it is all the more dangerous because it is seductive to at least some on the Centre-Left, in the name of democratisation and the decentralisation of power, as well as those on the Right, always keen to find ways to shrink the state and expand the role of civil society, including faith groups, in assisting low-income households in an explicit throwback to the pre-welfare state era (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013). The disastrous consequences of localism for homelessness were predictable, and, indeed, predicted (Fitzpatrick et al, 2011), and should make those considering themselves progressives wary of unqualified support for community-oriented, decentralised policy approaches in this sort of field.

Widening our argument beyond the immediate homelessness case, we would contend that a number of core criteria can be extracted from our analysis for more general deployment in determining the appropriate scale for social policy formulation. In our view, policymakers should ask themselves the following three key questions. First, do the relevant powers and duties impinge on people's ability to meet their most fundamental material needs, such as for food, shelter and warmth? Second, do they impact mainly or disproportionately on especially marginalised, unpopular, geographically dispersed or mobile populations? Third, do they pertain to specialist areas of public policy, where local expertise on evidence-based approaches may well be wanting? If the answer to any or all of these questions is 'yes', then localised approaches are highly likely to be both iniquitous and inefficient, and a centralised approach has much to commend it.

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Notes

¹ For the full report series, see: www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/

² See *R (Jakimaviciute) v Hammersmith & Fulham LBC* [2014] EWCA Civ 1438, [2015] HLR 5, CA.

³ Analysis based on annual Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Financial and General Statistics Estimates, using Consumer Price Index (CPI) as a deflator.

⁴ See: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-homelessness-tony-blair-rough-sleeping-louise-casey-a9361996.html

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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